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Data accrue on "visionary" agent to interrupt addiction

Few therapies exist for drug addiction, and unfortunately one agent that has shown promise—the plant alkaloid ibogaine—is mostly given in unsafe settings by addict self-help groups, says Deborah Mash (University of Miami, FL, USA). This means there is a "poverty of clinical data" on the effects of the preparation. However, Mash now has preliminary findings from almost 100 patients, and at a series of talks in the UK this month, she presented her results and called for further research to be top priority.

Ibogaine's anti-addictive properties have been shown in animals; in human beings, ibogaine often causes "dream-like states" at treatment doses but is quickly cleared from the bloodstream. The persistent metabo-

lite noribogaine should act to raise mood, ward off craving, and help an addict enter long-term therapy via its actions on both the serotonin transporter and on opiate receptors μ and κ (see *Lancet* 1998; 352: 1298).

After a single treatment, Mash's team found that Beck Depression Inventory scores improved significantly (mean 18 vs 4), and remained low for at least a month. There were also significant decreases in craving scores and in physician-rated signs of opiate withdrawal.

Adverse events seen during the acute treatment phase were nausea, vomiting, mild tremors, and transient ataxia; initial drops in heart rate and blood pressure occurred in a few patients, mainly "crack" cocaine abusers. "Whether the visions are

important [for efficacy], I cannot yet say", notes Mash, "but there are very profound experiences associated with ibogaine that can be life-transforming".

Despite these promising results, further drug development is likely to be hindered by continuing controversies. Ongoing litigation over patent rights between the University of Miami and Howard Lotsof, the discoverer of ibogaine's anti-addictive effects, seems likely to deter potential investors. In addition, some experts have reported cerebellar Purkinje-cell loss in rats treated with high doses of ibogaine. However, Mash found no such damage at necropsy of one former patient who died from other causes. Finally, proponents of ibogaine believe that clinical use of a US schedule-I drug is politically unpalatable in the USA, despite evidence of the lack of abuse potential.

Kelly Morris

Tabernanthe iboga

Legionella outbreak in Belgium passes its peak

An outbreak of *Legionella pneumophila* pneumonia among visitors to an exhibition of household items—the *Handelsbeurs*—held in Kapellen, Belgium, has reached its peak and no more cases are expected, say experts.

The outbreak was first reported by Belgian and Dutch media on Nov 15. The exhibition, which was

held in the first week of November, was visited by 70 000 people. In all, 88 patients were admitted to hospitals in Belgium and the Netherlands with pneumonia with high fever; four patients died. The most probable source of the infection was a bubble bath at the exhibition. The Flemish Ministry of Health has now issued a ban on the use of open

heated-water systems at exhibitions. The outbreak coincided with a court verdict in the Netherlands which cleared the organisers of a floral exhibition of responsibility for 154 cases of legionella pneumonia, 23 of whom died, which were linked to an infected whirlpool.

Wim Weber

End of the story for Di Bella cancer treatment?

Results published this month confirm that the unconventional Di Bella cancer treatment (see *Lancet* 1999; 353: 1289–90) does not prolong the survival of patients.

Italian researchers examined Di Bella's files on 3076 patients treated between 1971 and 1997. Only 248 patients were evaluable and had complete follow-up. All but four of the patients had received conventional therapy as well as the Di Bella treatment. Date of diagnosis and histology were confirmed for each patient from cancer registries, and each was matched with cases from a pooled database of Italian cancer registries.

5-year survival in patients older than 14 years of age for all cancers combined was 21% for patients using the Di Bella therapy but 49% for controls. For childhood leukaemias,

survival rates were 21% and 70%, respectively ($p=0.0001$ for both comparisons; *Cancer* 1999; 86: 2143–49).

Although it is possible that patients with a poor response to conventional therapy might have been more likely to try alternative therapies, first author Eva Buiatti (Unità Sanitaria Locale, Firenze, Italy) concludes that the results "do not support any evidence of the efficacy of the treatment proposed by Di Bella". Ten Italian phase II clinical trials of Di Bella's treatment have also yielded negative results, and Paul Calabresi (Brown University, Providence, RI, USA) congratulates Italian institutions in an editorial for "demonstrating unequivocally, in less than 1 year, that [Di Bella's therapy] is ineffective".

Bruno Simini

News in brief

Dangers of passive smoking On Nov 22, the US National Cancer Institute released a comprehensive report on the health effects of environmental tobacco smoke. The report links passive smoking with lung cancer, heart disease, and sudden infant death syndrome (<http://www.nci.nih.gov>).

Caffeine and miscarriages? A new study shows that mean serum concentrations of paraxanthine (a caffeine metabolite) were significantly higher in women who had miscarriages than in those with live-births. However, the risk of miscarriage was raised only in women with extremely high paraxanthine concentrations (more than 1845 ng/mL; *N Engl J Med* 1999; 341: 1639–44).